Earhart's photographer offers answer to mystery

Annette Chadney
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Many questions surround the death of Amelia Earhart, whose plane disappeared in 1937, never to be found again.

However, the answers are clear to Albert Bresnik, Earhart's personal photographer and close friend.

"Several stories about how Amelia died circulated after her death. All of them have flaws in their theories though," Bresnik said.

Bresnik first met Earhart in 1932 while attending high school.

To pay his way through school, Bresnik, 18, would take pictures of the Powderpuff Derby flyers at Roberts Airport.

"I would develop the pictures that night with my homemade darkroom and developer, take them back the next day and sell them for 50 cents. That is when I first met Amelia."

Bresnik landed a job as a part-time photographer at Columbia Studios at age 20. He started his own business as a freelance publicity photographer 1½ years later.

Besides working with Earhart, Bresnik did photographic work for Max Factor, several movie stars and the studios.

"The studios used me a lot because at that time there wasn't any such position as a freelance photographer," Bresnik said.

Bresnik eventually became Earhart's full-time personal photographer, accompanying her and her husband, George Putnam, on several flights, often for three or four weeks at a time.

"Amelia called me Little Brother, and I called her Big Sister," Bresnik said.

"She was a very charming person. Some photographers said she was difficult to work with, but we worked very well together," he said.

Several events lead to Earhart's mysterious disappearance, Bresnik explained.

Bresnik was scheduled to accompany Earhart on a series of trips in her newly assembled plane, along with her husband and Harry Manning, the navigator.

Albert Bresnik
Photographer

However, plans changed and Bresnik was told it was not necessary for him to make the trip. Instead, Manning, Fred Nooman, an ex-pilot with TWA and Paul Mantz, a stunt pilot for the studios, accompanied Earhart.

On a test flight to Hawaii, the plane's landing gear collapsed and had to be repaired.

The repair took so long that Manning and Mantz came back and Nooman stayed to fly with Earhart.

According to Bresnik, Nooman had recently been fired from TWA for being intoxicated. "We didn't know then that drunkenness was a disease," he said.

Since all the commercial parts had been scheduled, Earhart was obligated to continue on with the trip and opted to fly alone with Nooman.

Before Earhart took off for New Guinea, where she was being honored, Bresnik and Putnam received a telegram from her that read "Crew Unfit."

Bresnik believes Earhart continued the flight with Nooman but did the flying herself because Nooman was unable to fly.

"She probably became very tired and just could not go on anymore."

Several factors contribute to Bresnik's theory.

Earhart thought she might have been pregnant, and many believe that would answer the question as to why she was so tired.

Additionally, the radio in the plane was not properly functioning. Because it would have taken so much time to fix, Earhart chose to wait until she got home.

"There were a lot of circumstances besides just storm winds and bad weather that say she should not have made the flight, but she thought it would be simple, and she was a good pilot," Bresnik said.

A particularly interesting story that Bresnik tells is the premonition told to him by Dr. Fred Housteter of the Light Force Church on July 2, the day before Earhart disappeared.

At his studio on Highland Avenue, Bresnik hung a 40 x 60 picture of Earhart on the wall.

Housteter came in and told Bresnik that Earhart was dead.

"He told me that the 'light force' in the picture was now gone. He complimented me on my pictures and told me I captured the light force in all my pictures very well and that it was now gone, which meant she was dead."

On July 3, Housteter was nowhere to be found, according to Bresnik.

"Amelia told me that when she got back she was not going to accomplish any more feats, and she just wanted to be a normal woman. She was 39 years old then.

"Her plans were to teach at Purdue University and have her family like she wanted.

"I have always said if I had gone with her, this would never have happened."

According to Bresnik, several stories have cropped up through the years attempting to explain her disappearance.

One story calls her a spy, but Bresnik said, "she certainly was not."

Others say she was captured by the Japanese, but Bresnik's rebuttal is that if the Japanese had captured her they would have taken pictures of it. No photographs were ever found.

A popular theory is that Earhart fell in love with Nooman and they planned to run away together.

According to Bresnik, Amelia hated Nooman and never wanted to fly with him in the first place.

"These stories are interesting, and when I give my lectures, I say, it is all right for others to believe what they want, as long as they keep the spirit alive of the most wonderful person I have ever met."

Studies through the years by the Scripps Institute and other organizations have attempted to locate the spot where Earhart actually crashed or landed.

The present belief is that because of the current that surrounds Howland Island, where she was believed to have crashed, the plane wreckage has now drifted 100 miles north of the original spot

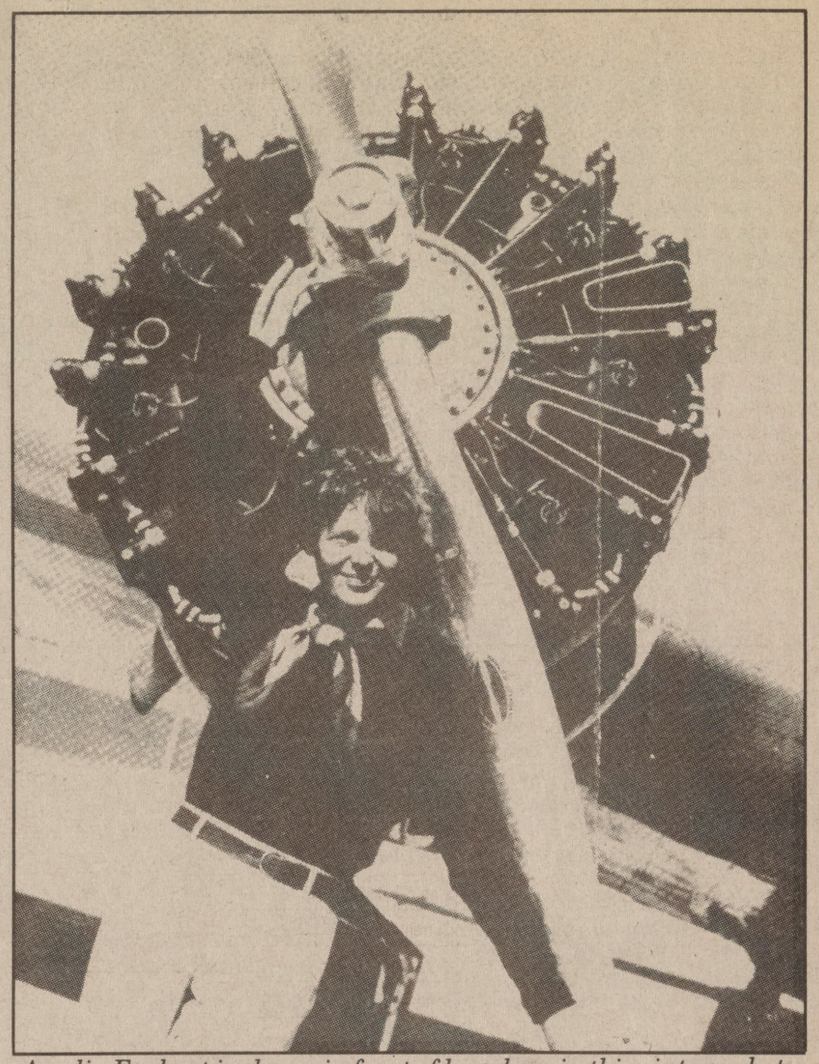
"I would like to find the truth in my time," said Bresnik.

"When I give lectures and I see that sparkle in the eyes of the new pilots, it gives me a great pleasure because I remember Amelia's spirit and sparkle.

Bresnik kept in contact with Putnam after Earhart's disappearance.

Putnam, according to Bresnik, was devoted to Amelia.

After two failed marriages following Earhart's death, Putnam eventually died of a broken heart.



Amelia Earhart is shown in front of her plane in this vintage photograph by Albert Bresnik, a close friend of the legendary aviator.

"He abided by all of her wishes, promised not to interfere with her proposed accomplishments. Putnam really cared for her."

Bresnik keeps the memory of Earhart alive in his lectures and his photographs, which he donates to museums and other organizations.

His pictures of Earhart hang at the San Diego Museum, the Santa Monica Flying Museum, and the Veckeville Nut Tree store, which has the most complete collection of memorabilia and books of Earhart.

"I am now making pictures in my home the way I did for Amelia. As long as I live I will be making them myself," Bresnik pledged.

"The negatives are just as sharp and clear as the day I took them, and the pictures, when developed, almost look as if Amelia is standing right there."

Bresnik plans to turn the historic photographs and negatives over to the Smithsonian Institution or Purdue University.